DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 240 957 HE 017 068

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TITLE Adult Learners as Perceived by Their Faculty.
PUB DATE Feb 84
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the California Educational Research Association (Los Angeles, CA, November 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Adult Students; *College Faculty; External Degree Programs; Failure; Graduate Students; Higher Education; Role Perception; *Student Characteristics; Student Teacher Relationship; *Success; *Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

The first phase of a longitudinal study conducted at the Fielding Institute investigated the circumstances or characteristics that lead to success for adults in an external graduate degree program, based on interviews with 16 faculty members. Respondents were given a set of cards naming students they knew well. The faculty sorted the cards into groups according to some dimension of student similarity, with the first sorting to be based on a vaguely described criterion of "academic performance." Groups were usually arranged along a continuum from negative to positive, permitting inferences about characteristics considered desirable or undesirable. Faculty interpretations of "academic performance" differed; a list of these interpretations is appended. The second sorting was based on the criterion that first came to mind, which was hypothesized to be connected to what is most important to the interviewee. Descriptions of those criteria are also appended. Preliminary analysis confirmed that patterns existed in the way faculty perceive their students. Four clusters of student characteristics seemed most important to faculty: (1) a productive, rich, and well-organized intellectual life; (2) compatibility in style with the faculty member; (3) self-directedness and ability to use all available resources; and (4) professional competence. (SW)

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Paper presented at the
California Educational Research Association Conference
Los Angeles, California, November 1983

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ADULT LEARNERS AS PERCEIVED BY THEIR FACULTY

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The study on which I am reporting was conducted at the Fielding Institute. The Fielding Institute is a school for mid-career adults who have several years of professional experience, and who wish to expand their professional options by acquiring a graduate degree. The institution has about 450 students in two different graduate programs. The largest program is the Psychology program with about 360 students, the smaller one is an interdisciplinary program in Human and Organization Development. The students come to Santa Barbara, where the institution's headquarters is located, in order to be screened for enrollment. They attend a five-day admissions workshop. Once they are accepted and have been connected with a mentor, they return to their workplaces and develop and then fulfill a study contract. Fielding works with students and faculty all over the United States, and even with a few in foreign countries. There is no further residence requirement, although students are welcome to attend academic sessions held in Santa Barbara and in other places throughout the country..

Obviously, these kinds of students need different skills and personality characteristics to be academically successful than traditional graduate students. It is important to select the right people for this kind of program, in order to keep the dropout rate low. (Our current drop-out rate is about 10%per year). We, therefore, asked ourselves the question: What are the circumstances or characteristics that lead to success for adults in an external graduate degree program? If it were possible to identify what it is that distinguishes those who graduate from those who drop out, admissions criteria and processes could be developed that are more likely to select the most appropriate applicants for an institution like the one in which our study was conducted.

The study design that came to mind first was to compare persons who successfully complete their study program with those who have withdrawn. We decided against that (although we have about 200 graduates), because a) we know that some adult students withdraw for personal reasons that might have nothing to do with academic success/failure, and b) we doubted that we would be able to obtain data of the same richness from people no longer at our institution as from those currently enrolled. We, therefore, decided to conduct a longitudinal study.

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The present project, then, is the first phase of this longitudinal study. We began with the assumption that the factors that are likely to influence adult student success are not clustered strictly around intelligence and motivation. It was important to us to explore all possible variables. Therefore, our goal for this first phase was to collect as broad a range of student characteristics as possible, so that we could later use them for discovering which ones are related to academic success, to leaving the school for personal reasons, and to withdrawal for academic reasons.

The persons who know our current students best are our faculty, who work with them in a close mentoring relationship. Their perceptions of their students would be our best source for generating possible relevant variables. We searched for other studies that would give us clues as to what is already known about faculty perception of students, or how to go about obtaining this information. Our search proved fruitless. There exists some literature on supervisor perception of their subordinates, but these studies are placed in an industrial setting that is not comparable to an external degree program. The only studies we could find that have explored faculty perceptions of students are the ones by Choi and Malak1 and by Davis2. Choi/Malak collected data on poor academic performance, Davis on desirable characteristics in students. Both deal with college students and use conventional academic criteria of success, as well as some personality and attitude measures. We concluded that we needed to design our own method for an extensive exploration on faculty perception of adult students.

In order not to limit our faculty to conventional indicators of success, we decided to develop student typologies that did not yet have a relationship to success. In an interview, each faculty was provided with cards on which the names of students were written who they knew closely. They were then asked to sort these cards into groups according to some dimension of student similarity.

The first sorting was done according to a criterion we provided to the interviewee, in order to facilitate the entry into the interview activity. We described the criterion quite vaguely, leaving the interpretation to the interviewee. Each person was asked to sort her students into groups according to their "academic performance" or "how they conduct themselves academically". From then on the person was asked to find other dimensions according to which to group their students, and to describe the criteria she had used. We wrote on the back of each student card the number of the groups into which the student had been sorted. This way we will later be able to construct an individual profile for each student.

We interviewed 16 out of a total of 32 faculty members who have been with the school for a long enough period to know intimately a large number of students

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1Choi, J.W. and Malak, J.F. Faculty Perception of Poor Academic Performance of Students in **Journal of College Student Personnel** 16, 4, 317-318, July 1975

2Davis, J.A. **Faculty Perceptions of Students: Characteristics of Students for Whom There is Faculty Agreement on Desirability** Part IV, Educatioal Testing Service, Princeton, N.J. June 1966

(Fielding is ten years old). The highest number of dimensions any person produced was 8, the lowest was 3. The average is 5.3.

The groups did not have to be normally distributed; in fact, if a person was not able to place one student in any of the groups, we allowed her to have a "group" for just that one student, or to subdivide groups. There was no restriction on the number of groups into which the person could divide her students within a dimension; there was also no restriction on how many dimensions the interviewee could think of.

Although our faculty had not been asked to do so, they usually arranged their groups along a continuum, i.e. they placed their students in clusters along a dimension that had a clearly discernable low or negative end and a corresponding high or positive end. This way they allowed us to make some inference about what they considered desirable or not desirable in their adult students.

We have begun a preliminary analysis to see whether there are patterns in the way our faculty perceive their students, i.e. whether they think of them in certain terms that are similar across the faculty body. There is, of course, one dimension that every faculty member used: academic performance. This dimension was interpreted differently by different people. **Appendix A** provides a list of interpretations of "academic".

Since the interpretations were so varied, we decided to include that first sorting in our qualitative analysis. The fact that the criterion was more or less provided by us did not keep the faculty from adjusting it to their own perceptions. I will get to the outcome of that analysis shortly.

Before I do, I want to let you look at the second sorting all faculty members did. The second sorting was the one for which the faculty members used the criterion that first came to mind when they were asked to think of their own ways of categorizing students. Since it is not unlikely that there is a connection between what first comes to mind and what is most important to the person, I have provided a list of abbreviated descriptions of the criteria chosen in **Appendix B.**

As I mentioned earlier, our analysis was done with the intention to see whether there are patterns in the way our faculty perceive their students, i.e. whether they think of them in certain terms that are similar across the group. Our preliminary analysis confirms that there are. Below is a list of the descriptors our faculty used most frequently when asked to arrange their students in groups:

<u>Patterns in the way faculty perceive adult students:</u>

Altogether 20 faculty sortings had to do with having a productive, rich, and wellorganized intellectual life. This category seems to be comprised of three related clusters:

Category 1a: ability to be organized, orderly, consistent, thorough, to assimilate academic knowledge well and to produce academic work at a good rate (8)

Category 1b: thinking that is clear, organized, conceptual, abstract, logical, academic (7)

Category 1c: being intellectually curious, having a broad range of interests, being intellectually flexible and sometimes divergent, willing to seek or produce novel ideas (5)

Our next cluster is quite homogenous and consists of 12 faculty sortings. It has to do with the compatability of styles between faculty and student, or simply the enjoyment of the student by the faculty.

Category 2: students I enjoy working with, for whom I have affection, whom I like, with whom I am comfortable, with whom I am compatible, for whom I would forego my fee, if that would help them stay in the program (12)

The third cluster is almost as homogenous as the second one. It consists of 11 faculty sortings, and has one subcluster. It has to do with self-directedness and the ability to use resources.

Category 3a: self-starting, self-directed, independent, able to work alone on a sustained basis (7)

Category 3b: making use of the Fielding system, of one's resources anywhere, being able to ask for help (4)

The contributions to the fourth cluster were made almost exclusively by our Psychology faculty. Seven times "professional competence" was used as a criterion for sorting students.

Category 4: therapeutic competence, skill, or talent, students who "I would want to join me in my practice', students who have potential for making a contribution to the field (7)

In summary, the following four clusters of student characteristics seemed most important to the faculty:

1. **having a productive, rich, and well organized intellectual life** vs. being scattered, distracted, narrow, and intellectually unproductive (used 20 times)
2. **being compatible in style with the faculty member** vs. not being enjoyed by her (used 12 times)
3. **being self-directed and able to make use of all available resources** vs. being dependent or unable to find any resources (used 11 times)
4. **being professionally competent** vs. not making a contribution to the chosen profession (used 7 times)

These four clusters are the major ones we found. A number of dimensions were used by only two to four faculty members:

5a: ability to deal with obstacles and frustrations, (3) and, related to this:
5b: degree to which the Fielding process is accepted and dealt with (2)

6: potential for completing their studies (4)

7: degree of self-actualization, emotional maturity, clarity of self-identity (3)

8: creativity (2)

We discovered that convergence was not the only interesting part of our research, but also divergence. Some dimensions were only used by one person, and some were truely unique and unexpected:

-- thinking "young" or "old" in terms of Kohlberg's moral development
-- students for whom my help made a difference
-- biological viability (being resilient and alive)
-- persons who could teach at Fielding
-- loners vs. group people
-- cool vs. passionate people
-- extroverted vs. introverted people
-- people with a male vs. female (softer, rounder) world view.
-- people I could trust with my life in a risky situation

Our **interpretation** at this point is that the mentors of adult students look for a very specific kind of intelligence in their students. Most of all, they need them to be well organized not only in their thinking, but in the way they handle their academic lifes. Being intellectually clear and orderly is a property that seems to stand out for the faculty of adults. Likewise, intellectual flexibility and richness, and enjoyment of the abstract and conceptual are qualities noted with appreciation by this faculty. Interestingly, having a good working relationship with their students seems to be more important than anything else except specific intellectual qualities. Intellectual styles have to compatible, and faculty want to actively enjoy their work with adult students. Self-directedness, which is often seen as the most important attribute that distinguishes adults from younger learners, reached third place only. That professional competence is one of the criteria most often used by mentors of adults attests to the importance they assign to the adult's work. Faculty seem to consider adults in a more holistical way than they would consider youger students; competence in their chosen profession might be a reflection of their general competence as mature human beings.

We are planning to use the four dimensions (including all the subgroups) for designing an instrument that we then give to our faculty with the request to rate each student whom they know well on all dimensions. This way we will have a profile for each student. Our longitudinal study will continue until each student so characterized has left the institution either by withdrawal or graduation. We then will determine whether any of these variables are related to either withdrawal for personal reason, for academic reasons, or to successful completion of the graduate program. I hope to be able to report to you at that time our results.

In the meantime we expect that knowing how faculty perceive adult students will allow us to

1. describe what kinds of people this instutition serves,
2. determine what kinds of characteristics faculty prefer in adult students
3. match students with faculty persons in the most suitable way.

In the long run, we will have established criteria for the selection of adult students that should serve to reduce drop-out in our institution and in others who also cater to the self-directed adult learner.

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Appendix A

Interpretations of the concept "academic" made by faculty of an external graduate degree program for adults.

-- Students who are conceptual and organized thinkers vs. those who are intuitive and those who are pragmatic

-- Students who assimilate academic knowlegde fast, clearly, and organizedly vs. those whose pattern of taking in information is not as steady and not as good

-- Students who have high intellectual ability, are organized, and in control of their lives vs. those who are disorganized or distracted and those who have less intellectual capacity

-- Students who overall produce excellent and polished work at a good rate vs. those who produce little and need a lot of help with it

-- Students who are self-directed and accept responsibility for their own learning vs. those who need directions and help

-- Students who are able to integrate their knowledge and experience into the Fielding knowledge areas and are more abstract thinkers vs. those who either are not very bright or are divergent thinkers who have difficulty focussing

-- Students who are intellectually curious, take the initiative, and enjoy knowledge for its own sake vs. those who don't think clearly and have weak egos

-- Students who are well organized, consistent, seek honest feedback, and have their lifes in order vs. those who are confused, disorganized, and not productive

-- Students whose academic work has breadth and depth, who are motivated and organized and have "brain power" vs. those whose academic work (assessments) is poor, who cannot integrate their ideas, and who have various kinds of psychological problems

-- Students who can focus, come up with new configurations of ideas, and have high life energy vs. those who are intellectually slow, are unable to manage their own progress, and have low energy

-- Students who are "in charge", are motivated, quick, and focussed vs. those who are "blocked", more pragmatic thinkers and less interested in scholarly material

-- Students who are curious, intellectually energetic, and have comprehensive interests vs. those who have narrow interests, have less intellectual energy, and less intellectual capacity

Appendix A (continued)

-- Students who are orderly, precise, and write good assessments vs. those who write poor asessments, are defensive and dependent

-- Students who think clearly and abstractly, and complete tasks quickly vs. those who are not able to think clearly and conceptually and don't communicate well

--Students who are conscientious and thorough, provide more than necessary, and are independent vs. those who try to get by for assessments with what they do for their professional work, and who need to be pushed to relate that work to theory

-- Students who are motivated to succeed and have high potential vs. those who have modest abilities and get frustrated easily

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Appendix B

Criteria chosen most spontaneously by faculty in an adult graduate degree program when asked to categorize their students in ways other than academic performance.

-- self-directedness
-- therapeutic competence
-- curiosity
-- research thinking (logic)
-- scholarship (conceptual thinking)
-- use of the system (the institution)and its resources
-- being intellectual in one's interests
-- seriousness about being a therapist
-- therapeutic competence
-- ability to ask for help
-- own enjoyment of working with student
-- creative/holistic thinking
-- verbal ability
-- ability to work independently
-- motivated, self-starting
-- low interference from life stress